



Cloudy with a chance of silver lining by Bookaholica

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Summary: Only stupid people fall in love and if there's something Jane 'Eleven' Brenner knows for sure is that she's not stupid. Mileven Modern College AU.

1. Chapter 1

A/N: Already back with yet another modern college au? YOU BET I AM.

Hey everyone! I was truly not expecting to be back so soon with something new (especially since I'm also working on finishing RiM), but here I go at it again. This first chapter is sort of vague, since I've yet to figure the whole thing out. Though, I confess that I may or may not have some ideas and scenes and dialogues scribbled on the corners of my college readings.

I. SANTA ANA

Thinking 'bout the perfect sound.

Lately I've been taking my time just feeling the breeze of the sunny weather.

And it's crazy.

Her shoes barely scraped against the gravel as she walked fast through the street, taking her time to look around at the residential buildings on both of her sides and the nicely-kept gardens that decorated their entrance.

It was strangely quiet today, probably a symptom of the beginning of school season.

She was supposed to be jogging, after all, that's what she'd told Max she would be doing.

Truth was, however, that she was half-heartedly attempting to power walk near Santa Ana beach, just listening to music and taking her time.

Lately, her roommate and best friend, Max Mayfield, had been pestering her nonstop because, apparently, she was a victim of what the redhead young woman called an "unhealthy sedentary routine". Which, as it turns out, was something that could actually kill her early someday – Max, who was taking it seriously enough for the two

of them, had even showed her a few statistics and a documentary about it.

Faced with such a dramatic situation and taking into account that her friend wasn't taking it nearly seriously enough, Max had taken it upon herself to pester her daily into having what she called a "better and healthier lifestyle". Which was something that, despite all her sarcastic jokes and grumpiness and annoyance, she actually appreciated. She'd never really had anyone caring about her eating or exercise habits and it was kind of nice to feel someone giving a shit about stuff like that, giving a shit about her.

However, Max – and her hyperactive demeanor – could be overwhelming at times, especially to someone as lazy and careless as her.

It wasn't really that she hated exercising. No, it was more that she saw no real, practical reason to do it. Plus, she *hated* sweating.

She figured that exercise would finally come in useful if like, for some remote reason, there was a zombie apocalypse... or the Pacific Ocean suddenly overflowed. But since none of those scenarios seemed plausible enough, she'd long ago decided that dedicating time to stuff like that was pointless and therefore settled into her "sedentary" routine.

All of those years of barely any activity, nonetheless, did seem to have taken a toll on her. She remembered that she was a decent – not good but not humiliatingly bad either – runner back in high school. Right now, however, her calves were starting to ache, despite her walk only having lasted about an hour.

This sucks so much, she thought in annoyance as she turned up the volume of the random song she was currently listening to in an attempt to take her mind of the discomfort in her unused muscles.

She walked for a few more minutes before finally stopping.

As she slowly breathed in and out, she admired the pink and orange hues mingling together in the sky. It was a peaceful sight, a pretty one. Something breathtaking in comparison to the sunsets back at

home. She'd never considered herself a cheesy person but, right now, all she wanted to do was sit for a minute and listen to her (awesome) playlist and stare out into the ocean.

She had to admit that this was definitely better than staying locked away at home, which she probably would be right now if it weren't for Max's stubbornness.

Reassured by the emptiness of the streets and the overall quietness, she climbed over the ludicrous brick fence that divided the sidewalk from the cliff. She was very well aware that, despite the fact that the "fence" was mostly there for decoration – seeing as it was barely as high as her waist (and she was rather on the smaller side) – what she was doing was most likely forbidden.

It had been quite a long time since she'd given in to her reckless impulses like that. It'd been years even.

The beach was a few good meters down and she smiled as she sat on the soft grass, at the least steep part of the slope. To her left, she could see a few people paragliding. The way the wind swayed their bodies like boneless rag dolls seemed so surreal from where she sat at the moment. She couldn't help but get lost in thought.

"Is everything alright over there?" a faint voice asked.

It was way too easy to ignore it.

They are probably not even talking to me.

"Are you ok?" the stranger's voice sounded a lot closer now, there was no way they weren't talking to her.

She turned around, with every intention to tell whoever it was to mind their own business and leave her alone.

Concerned dark brown eyes were the first feature she focused on the second she turned around with an annoyed stance. Dark, observant eyes that somehow seemed to perfectly match the pale face of the worried boy who was currently staring at her from the other side of the brick fence.

She could actually feel all the anger and annoyance in her demeanor immediately dissolve, the bitchy remark dying on her lips.

"I'm just... I'm fine," she answered with a weak smile, looking down and trying not to stare at his face like a creep.

But he was cute.

Cute in a nerdy way, but cute nevertheless.

He seemed the weird kind of familiar. The kind of familiar one would feel about an old preschool classmate, or about someone that once stood out to you as you walked down the street. She blinked a little in confusion. She was trying to figure out why his face ringed a bell while, at the same time, trying not to appear like a complete moron to him.

He climbed off his bike and hesitantly got closer to the fence – which looked even shorter and useless next to his ridiculously tall frame.

"Is it too nosy of me to ask why you are over there?" he wondered, looking warily at the beach and the cliff she was currently sitting by.

"Yeah, it is sort of nosy," she blurted out without really intending to.

He's going to think I'm such a bitch, she thought with concern.

She scoffed at her uncharacteristic thought shortly after, *Why do I care? Let him think I'm a rude bitch.*

However, Bicycle Guy blushed.

Cute, the uncalled for thought just popped into her head, catching her off guard and leaving her speechless for a moment.

"I was just taking a break from walking," she finally offered with a hesitant smile.

Of course he wouldn't want to know that the beauty of the sky drew me in during my fake jogging session, she thought darkly.

"So you sit in the verge of a precipice every time you take a break?"

he joked.

She glanced at him and couldn't stop the grin that tugged at her lips.

Why am I acting so fucking weird?

She couldn't even remember the last time she'd felt this insecure –not even right before the interview before getting admitted to college, she recalled.

"It's far enough from the edge, actually," she said rather dryly, glancing at the beach bellow.

A few moments passed in silence.

There also was this weird sinking, tickling feeling in her stomach. It was unsettling.

Then she heard a clank metallic noise, as of something had dropped on the ground.

"It unnerves me to see you over there," he confessed as he took a hesitant step in her general direction.

She was still looking at the beach ahead.

"How do you think those people feel?" she asked randomly, gesturing towards the people swaying several feet above the ground, the very people she'd been observing.

"Huh?"

"I always sort of wondered what it felt like to fly, isn't that close enough?" she whispered, as she turned to glance at the rapidly darkening sky once more.

"Probably but, uh, I heard that wing suit flying is the closest," Bicycle Guy said, scratching his jaw thoughtfully.

"If I had to choose a superpower, it'd be flying," she casually said.

"Really? That brings up so many things!" he blurted out excitedly.

"For instance, do you mean flying because you'd grow wings like Archangel, The Wasp, or Pixie? Or flying because you could somehow manipulate gravity like Graviton? Or maybe by wind control like Stor-"

However, as he glanced at her and registered the look of utter confusion on her face, he abruptly stopped and cast his eyes downwards.

"I'm such a nerd," he said apologetically, his pale freckled cheeks reddening by the second.

"Oh, it's alright," she answered with a smile, for the record, she had actually thought it was pretty damn adorable, "really."

Bicycle Guy, however, did not seem to think the same. He was still blushing as he bent down to pick up his bike, which had lain forgotten down on the pavement.

Her heartbeat sped up in sudden incomprehensible panic.

What the actual fuck?

She didn't want him to leave.

I don't even know the guy!

Oh but maybe she did? What was that weird feeling she had when she first saw him? It was like she recognized him somehow... her gut kept telling her that she did, and if she trusted something it was her instincts (they were *never* wrong).

Say something, anything.

"I'd never actually thought about the mechanics of the whole flying thing," she commented, "which one of those you mentioned is the best?"

At that, he stopped fidgeting with his bicycle and propped it carefully against the concrete fence as he pondered about all the choices. After what seemed an eternity, his excited dark eyes once again settled on hers.

"Well, flying through wind control like Storm sounds awesome, especially since she can control the weather," he answered offering her a small smile.

She smiled back at him, finding his boyish excitement amusing.

For a while, he continued to ramble on about all the different powers that could allow people to fly. Surprisingly, and despite never having been a big fan of superhero movies or comics, she found herself hanging on to his every word.

She wished she could feel such passion for something.

"-but... I definitely think I'd like flying like Justice," he continued, grinning at the very idea, "he's a telekinetic and he can use his power on himself to fly really fast and even carry people and heavy stuff... it's *awesome*."

They went on to talk about what it would be like to have secret powers and, before long, the sky went dark and the lights of the street became the main sources of light. Absentmindedly, she glanced at the time on her phone and realized it was already late. Really, really late. Later than she'd planned on returning. Max would probably be worried if she didn't make it in ten more minutes.

She hated the fact that she'd have to cut her conversation with Bicycle Guy short – it was the longest she'd had with anyone in a while –, but she figured it was best to walk home now rather than later.

"Do you have to go?" he asked, almost immediately perceiving it from her fidgety behavior.

"Actually, I do," she answered getting up from her place on the grassy area.

All that time, he'd been casually leaning against the brick fence that divided the sidewalk and the broad edge of the cliff. He readily offered her his hand to help her jump down from over the rustic fence she had managed to get perched over. She took it without hesitation, despite not really needing the extra help (the fence was

not even that high).

"I had a good time," she smiled, still not letting go of his hand, "we should do this again."

He blushed a deep red and just blinked at her stupidly, his brain trying and failing to come up with something to say.

Without waiting for him to answer, she turned around and jogged away.

-...-...-...-

She's not easy to find and if I see her again

We should get together.

His mind was working overdrive as he pedaled home.

What does it mean? Does she want to see me again? I didn't even ask for her name, he thought thinking back to his conversation with the girl that had (in the span of a couple of hours) pretty much become the girl of his dreams.

Not only was she beautiful – probably the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen –, but she was really nice and overall his dream girl. For hell's sake, she had even seemed interested in his nerdy chatter! And that was really saying something, since most girls he'd tried talking to about comic books and superheroes vanished faster than he could say "Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters".

...Well, thinking back on that one, he reckoned that maybe *he* and his overall weirdness (and not comic books and superheroes) were the actual reasons the girls vanished. His friends would probably agree on that, too.

He just wasn't good at small talk and he was really, really awkward around girls... especially around the ones he considered pretty.

And man, had that girl at the beach been *pretty*. How could he even begin to explain it? She was pretty in a simple, unassuming way. Pretty in the way all of her features – despite their individual

imperfections – fit together in the most breathtaking, perfect way.

In a daze, he remembered her soft, brown hair barely falling past her shoulders and those two cute dimples that appeared on the corners of her lips and mouth when she smiled. And the way she'd actually been enraptured throughout his superhero ramble, which was probably due to his amazing story-telling skills – something he'd never been prouder about.

Plus, she was smart and funny too, he could tell from her witty remarks and sarcastic answers. And her lively almond eyes had lit up captivantly when she talked about flying and when he explained why he'd choose his superpower to be telekinesis (he had ultimately managed to convince her that it was the best thing ever).

And she'd said she'd like to see him again.

But left without introducing herself, or giving him the chance to ask for her name.

What does it mean?

There was definitely a connection, he thought dreamily before mentally slapping himself for having such stupid and cheesy thoughts.

When he finally got to his building, the climb up the flight of stairs carrying his bike didn't seem as tiring, long and tedious as it always did. He was dying to discuss this recent turn of events with his three best friends (who also happened to be his roommates); he was pretty sure they'd probably have a better idea of what the heck had actually happened and what he was supposed to do.

However, when he entered the narrow door of his shared apartment, the only one on the living room was Dustin. His curly-haired friend was currently playing a videogame and screaming at the screen in frustration.

"Mike you're making me lose!" he said as a way of greeting.

"What?!" Mike exclaimed in fake indignation, throwing his hands in the air dramatically, "I barely even walked in."

"Well you've jinxed me somehow!"

Mike smiled at his frustrated friend, as he made his way to his room.

"Son of a bitch!" he heard Dustin screaming at the TV before he closed his bedroom door and plopped down on his partially made bed.

It seemed that his talk would have to wait for the time being.

-...-...-...-

Baby we could stay in the sun, maybe if you want we could go downtown.

Baby I've been dreaming 'bout you and I'm feeling naïve of the sunny weather.

The first thing she did as soon as she got home was drink a lot of water. It was incredible just how dehydrated she'd become after the jog home.

Max watched her best friend from the living room couch she was currently lounging in.

"Was the workout *that* intense?" she asked, lifting a red eyebrow in amusement.

As an answer, she gave her friend a dirty look.

"Anyhow, I'm proud of you, El," Max said honestly, "I knew you had it in you."

"I won't get used to this," she replied miserably as she joined her redhead friend on the living room.

"You will, and you'll feel better because of it," the redhead said condescendingly.

El threw one of the nearby pillows at her.

The redhead easily dodged it.

"Stop treating me like a baby," El complained loudly.

Max stuck her tongue out at her.

"I had been willing to forget that today is your turn to cook us dinner but since you don't want to be treated like a baby..."

"Oh fine, but I'm going to take a shower first," she said, getting up from the couch and rolling her eyes. Everyone knew how much she hated cooking.

As El stood under the hot spray of the shower, lathering her wavy hair, her mind couldn't help but obsessively replay the moment Bicycle Guy and she had briefly held hands. She'd gotten weird tingles on her palm. It was uncomfortable. Now that there was no other distraction, the tingling seemed to only get stronger somehow. With a huff, she tried scratching her hand.

Weird.

A/N: As a side note, something to bear in mind is that the story takes place in California and that the characters all go to Berkeley. Also about that, I have to admit that I've never been to that part of California, in fact I've only ever been to San Diego. Santa Ana beach is a creation of mine, it doesn't actually exist.

So, take that into account if my descriptions are completely inaccurate and suck. Also, English is not my first language, so please be patient with any and all grammar/spelling mistakes. Though by all means feel free to point out my errors out so I can improve my writing and make the story better. Anyhow, I'd love to hear what you think so far.

2. Chapter 2

II. I TRY

Games, changes and fears

When will they go from here?

When will they stop?

There was a familiar sour taste invading her mouth.

There was a pounding on the sides of her head.

And she hadn't drank a single drop of alcohol the night before. Even more so, she hadn't gone out at all last night.

However, every single year without an exception, she'd wake up with an un-alcoholic related hangover. Every day, every year since she was a little girl. Eleven blinked slowly before completely opening her eyes and getting up. Mainly out of routine, the young woman grabbed her phone from the nearby wooden bedside table. It was like she inherently *knew* what day it was before even checking it.

Saturday, September 23rd. Her mother and stepfather's marriage anniversary. The day The Brenner Family came to be.

She could feel her stomach churning painfully – out of disgust, probably.

Despite knowing her redhead best friend probably had plans for them tonight – mainly because Max was perfectly ware of what a shitty effing day this was and also because it had sort of become a tradition for them to get wasted on September 22nds –, El wasn't able to feel anything other than an all-consuming dread.

Ad who could blame her, really.

Eleven knew she had to call them: put on her best fake happy smile and wish them the absolute best day in the world. Then, she'd ask if they had gotten the ridiculously expensive (and ugly) gift she'd

bought for them and pretend to be excited for the (lame) plans they probably had for the day.

It didn't matter that it made Eleven sick to her freaking stomach to picture what was probably happening behind the cold, loveless stare of her stepfather and the (fake) smile her mother will most surely be sporting today. It didn't matter that she knew for a fact that her mother was unhappy. It didn't matter that El knew that her mother would probably spend the night crying in the bathroom, like she used to do whenever she thought her husband and daughter were already asleep. It didn't matter that Terry Ives had been living the life of a prisoner for many, many years – the life of a comfortable prisoner: like a canary in a gilded cage, rather than an actual person in jail.

Martin Brenner was a cold, unsympathetic and meticulous man who was genuinely convinced that money was happiness and love: if there was something someone as heartless as Dr. Martin Brenner could pride himself in was that he provided the most ridiculously plush life for his wife and stepdaughter.

They had nothing to complain of, in theory.

But, in reality, there was a lot that they lacked.

He could never provide love or happiness by himself if his life depended on it, El thought with disgust.

The young woman could not bring herself to imagine how there had indeed been a time in which she had actually admired such a man. The very thought of that was a source of great shame to her. Jane Ives had been only six when Terry Ives introduced her to her new boyfriend – "meet your Papa", Terry had said to the excited little girl. Little Jane Ives had been helplessly blinded by all the new toys and her new pink room (she'd never had a whole bedroom for herself), and she couldn't help but truly believe that Martin Brenner was the best thing that had happened to their small, broken family.

Well, she realized now with bitterness, any man could become a hero in a little girl's eyes when she never had anyone else to compare him to.

El was glad that she'd gotten over that phase soon enough.

All it took was witnessing by chance how Martin Brenner punched her mother in the stomach. *You stupid disgusting whore, you and your scrawny girl are absolutely nothing without me.* Little Jane had watched in shock the way her mother crumpled to the ground as her stepfather mercilessly spewed terrible words at her, further breaking her down. *You should be thankful I'm generous enough to give you a roof and a bed for free, all you have to do is keep your fucking mouth shut and be the perfect wife I want you to be. Are you really so fucking stupid you can't understand that at least?*

The eight-year-old had been terrified by the whole thing and, despite all the smiling therapists and exotic chocolates and expensive toys, had refused to mutter a single word for a year after that.

Like her daughter, Terry Ives had changed after that, too. The older woman had also grown quiet and slowly started keeping a lot more to herself – ashamed by what had happened, for being unable to "please the man she loved". Because if there was something Terry Ives was sure of despite everything was that she was *in love* with Martin Brenner.

Terry loved him so, *so much*.

She needed him.

She would die for him.

And because Terry loved him and trusted him and would do anything for him, slowly, she let Brenner become her everything and take over everything else in her life. She stopped working and going out with her friends and, later on, refused to go out at all except if she had Brenner by her side. She also stopped spending time with her daughter up until, at one point, it was almost as if she had forgotten the little girl's entire existence.

Terry Ives became absent, blissfully absent, despite being right there.

Suddenly it was as if Terry didn't know how to be Jane's mother anymore, as if she didn't even know who Jane *was*. It became usual

for the little girl to feel neglected and unloved by her previously caring and loving mother.

Terry's daughter, Jane, observed her mother's tragic decay from the sidelines. Always present and silently watching but always going unnoticed by her mother.

The young girl had been deeply hurt by it; especially when, after being viciously pushed away both physically and emotionally by her mother, Jane realized that Terry probably didn't love her anymore. The young girl grew up resenting Martin Brenner and, later on, (after trying countless times to talk to her mother about the abuse and after being pushed away one too many times) she grew to resent her mother, too.

She was disgusted by her stepfather's abominable actions, but she was also disgusted by her mother's weakness. How could someone change so completely?

Soon, Brenner became the actual parent in the house, always terribly demanding but at least giving young Jane some of the attention she craved – he seemed to believe she was capable enough to do something with her life and, despite feeling a deep hatred for him, little Jane always tried not to disappoint him. When Jane Ives turned eleven years old, Martin Brenner legally adopted her and she officially became Jane Brenner, the Doctor's perfect and obedient daughter.

For everyone in town, Martin, Terry and Jane were the perfect nuclear family. Always polished, always smiling.

It had been years and years of Jane keeping all the disgust, hatred, discomfort and resentment in. Even now, some days, El wondered how a young girl could have been able to endure everything for so fucking long. She had been lucky to meet Max Mayfield during the fourth grade; having such a loyal and caring person as a steady presence in her life definitely helped balance out all of the bad.

Most of the time, the young girl had managed to be the perfect daughter for Brenner, in the hopes of being able to leave one day and never look back. Max and her had a plan figured out, in which they

would move to the other side of the country as soon as possible and finally forget all about their shitty families.

El had to admit that Max's genius plan mainly worked fine... except on days like this.

Even now, in college and thousands of miles away from Terry Ives and Martin Brenner, the ghosts of the past still followed her around everywhere. El tried to think that all of it had made her stronger. Her mother's weakness and unwillingness to leave Brenner – El had tried to get her out of that marriage *so many times*, only to be rudely pushed away and viciously attacked by her mother – had managed to convince her of one thing: only stupid people made the blunder of falling in love.

Love was control.

Love was about someone winning and someone losing.

Love was the worst mistake anyone could make in their live.

Love was *bad*.

If there was something Jane 'Eleven' Brenner knew for sure, was that she was not stupid.

She would rather die than make the same idiotic mistake her mother did.

I play it off, but I'm dreaming of you

And I'll keep my cool, but I'm fiendin'

It had been two weeks since Mike had met that beautiful and intriguing girl at the Santa Ana beach. And he couldn't forget her (not that he was trying, or something). He couldn't stop thinking about her, about what he'd *felt* during the couple of hours they'd talked.

It had been amazing.

However, the situation had also become a source of great frustration for him and he couldn't stop kicking himself mentally for being so

stupid and letting his "opportunity" with her slip through his fingers. Mike knew for a fact that there were zero to no chances of them ever meeting again by chance, he had done the math.

The fact that his three best friends had agreed that he had been a dweeb for not asking for her name hadn't helped at all either. Who could have guessed that the first time all of them could agree on something it would be on how utterly awkward and unlucky Mike's love life was? It was ironic even.

But Michael Wheeler was not a quitter and he was determined to find her again, even if just to learn her name. It would be an understatement to say that he'd been desperately hoping to bump into her, even though it was a mostly delusional wish.

For that reason, most afternoons of the fourteen days that had passed, he could be found "casually" biking down the road near the bay area or sitting on the sidewalk reading comics with his back on the brick fence.

However, there had been no luck.

I try to say goodbye and I choke

Try to walk away and I stumble

Despite how much she'd actually wanted to talk to Bicycle Guy again, El kept her distance. She went out for a power walk almost every afternoon or night but always carefully avoided the bay area and the beach in general – which was a shame, really, since the view never failed to make her feel relaxed and better.

Two days after meeting Bicycle Guy, she had made her way to the bay area wondering absentmindedly whether she should convince Max to do a marathon of the X-Men movies some of this days.

And he'd been there.

She'd been so distracted she almost didn't notice him. Almost. But those black curls (flopping wildly because of the breeze) and the bicycle by his side were telling. It was such familiar a sight and yet everything about it belonged to such a stranger. She knew deep down

that it could mean no good.

El's heart had done a weird sort of flop and she turned the other way and ran.

Why had she done that? Not even she could say for sure.

It was ironic, really. El had never been intimidated by the unknown.

In fact, most of her non-academic decisions had been taken based on the wise principle of "fuck-it-all" as an answer to any and all life-changing questions.

Cut your hair really short because you just can't handle brushing it every morning (and wasting precious time you could spend sleeping)? Duh. Sneak out on a school night to go to a college party where you know no one? Sure! Get a quirky black tattoo with your weird childhood nickname on the inside of the wrist? Fuck yeah! Spray paint obscenities on the lockers of the dumb mouth breathers who made fun of your short hair? Obviously. Go out with the older boy you met in detention? Yes (despite knowing how much of a fuckboy he is). Drive said fuckboy's motorcycle without a helmet (despite not knowing how to drive)? Sure, why not. Attempt to climb a wire fence on a dare despite having a broken arm (courtesy of the motorcycle drive)? Fuck yes.

And on and on it went.

So much so that Max got scared enough and couldn't help but abandon her own reckless behavior for her friend's sake sometime during sophomore year. The redhead girl knew that all of it was her friend's way of rebelling and forgetting and letting go of all the crappiness of her life at the Brenner household. Max, having the home life she had, truly understood and empathised with it. However, sometimes, even she had to admit that Jane 'El' Brenner couldn't really put herself a limit.

And something like that could only end badly for her brunette friend.

By the time they'd gone to college, El's yolo attitude was a lot more moderate than what it once was. However, her fearlessness and

boldness had remained.

With this in mind, it was understandable why El would now find her thoughtless instinct of running away from Bicycle Guy so intriguing and unsettling.

The more she thought about it, the more she told herself that it was just avoiding trouble, really... at least that was what she was trying to convince herself of every afternoon she set a sneakered foot outside her and Max's apartment and walked on the opposite direction of the beach area.

I believe that fate has brought us here

And we should be together babe

But we're not

"EARTH TO MIKE," Lucas bellowed in his friend's general direction, waving his hand in front of his freckled face.

"Huh? What?" Mike asked, looking around and trying to act normal as he poured a generous portion of maple syrup into his scrambled eggs.

"Dude, you've got to stop zoning out like that," Dusting intervened with his mouth full of scrambled eggs and bread.

"It's gotten worse," Will commented.

Lucas and Dustin nodded in agreement.

"Man, you've got to get your shit together and get ov-," Dustin began.

"—anyway, I was just telling you nerds that I've actually got us tickets to the best fucking rave in the city," Lucas explained, interrupting Dustin midsentence and barely able to contain his excitement.

Dustin looked up from his half-empty plate, mouth hanging open in disbelief.

"Lucas, when will you understand we are just not the party type?"

Mike wondered with a sigh as Will nodded.

"Are you for real man? Last time we had to drag you out before those lacrosse players beat the shit out of you," Dustin continued looking at his friend with disbelief, "you put the Party in danger, we almost perished!"

"That's exactly what I mean!" Mike exclaimed.

"I would prefer to stay home today," Will added.

"Come on you nerds! It's Saturday!" Lucas shouted incredulously.

"Not in the mood dude," Dustin answered, shrugging.

"Yeah," Mike simply added as he shoved a spoonful of sweetened scrambled eggs into his mouth.

Lucas glanced hopefully at Will.

The thin boy had gone out with Lucas as a "wingman" a couple of times, feeling sorry for the fact that none of the other two had wanted to go with him. Will, however, always ended up thoroughly regretting it every time.

"I'm sorry Lucas," Will said, looking apologetic.

"How can you guys be so fucking boring?" Lucas complained.

"Do you realize our lives are basically a bad remake of The Big Bang Theory?" Lucas asked in outrage, "We need to spice things up!"

Will, Mike and Dustin glared at Lucas, not quite believing what he just said.

Everything went silent for a while but then Dustin laughed loudly, his whole body shaking hilariously, and almost fell out of the stool he was currently sitting on. Will, who was the closest to the curly haired boy, tried to help steady him but, unfortunately, let out a bubble of laughter he'd been repressing and both of them comically slipped from their stools. Both boys (and their stools) landed loudly on the floor.

"Motherfucker!" Dustin exclaimed as he rubbed his backside.

At that, neither Mike nor Lucas could maintain their serious façades and, all at once, erupted in loud chuckles.

I may appear to be free

But I'm just a prisoner...

And I may seem all right and smile...

But my smiles are just a front

The screen was dark for a second before an image appeared on the screen of the tablet she was currently holding. The familiar faces of her mother and stepfather filled the wide surface of the screen and El did her best not to flinch at the painful onslaught of memories those two faces brought her.

"Good morning Papa," El said trying to plaster the biggest, toothiest happy smile on her face, "hello mom".

She could feel Max's sympathetic and supportive presence in the background, and she felt a tiny bit reassured. Despite her tough and cool exterior, the thing that El could no longer bear to face alone was *them*, especially on this day.

"Jane, it's always such a joy to see you," Brenner said emotionlessly, his piercing eyes assessing his stepdaughter coldly, "isn't it dear?"

As if on cue, Terry Ives smiled at her daughter on the computer screen on their side of the country.

El's smile faltered a bit.

Her mother's gaze seemed dazed, like it always did now, but her unwrinkled face was unusually pale. So pale that not even the heavy layer of makeup on Terry's face could cover up the large bags underneath her eyes.

"How's mom doing?" El asked, gulping the knot on her throat and knowing better than to ask her mother directly.

Brenner glanced at his wife with distaste.

"She's been having insomnia and refusing to eat three times a day," her stepfather answered, talking about his wife as if she was an unruly, disobedient child who wasn't even in the same room.

"But she's doing better now with the special pills my friend prescribed," he answered coldly, "aren't you my dear?"

Terry smiled another fake smile and nodded exaggeratedly.

Jane's worried frown deepened and Brenner noticed.

"Go on, tell Jane here how great you're doing Terry," he prodded.

"I'm fine Jane! I've never been happier".

It made El sick to her stomach to know that, knowing how fucked up things were, Terry probably truly believed that *this* was a happy life.

"Did you get my present?" El asked attempting another fake smile, desperately wanting to get the video call over with.

"It was delightful Jane," Brenner said, "your mother loved it."

El smiled. She didn't know if she felt relief over Brenner finding her actions satisfactory, or if she felt disappointment over Brenner not being displeased by the ugly vase she'd bought as an anniversary present for them and the failure of her little rebellious act.

"Well, I have to go now, you know, lots of stuff to organize and read and, uh, do... but I hope you have an amazing day!" she said, trying not to make it sound sarcastic or accidentally roll her eyes.

"We always do," Brenner answered.

Terry Ives smiled at her daughter, meeting her gaze on the screen for the first time.

I'm ok, the older woman seemed to wordlessly say.

El looked downwards and pressed the red button on the lower part of

the screen, the smile dying on her lips as soon as the call ended.

She knew better.

A/N: Thanks for all the lovely comments on the first chapter. I'm so excited for you to see what I have in store for this story!

Please tell me what are your thoughts so far! :)

3. Chapter 3

III. REALITY IN MOTION

*Trying to be patient, I'm feeling ancient
Trying to control but the wave that I'm facing
Suppose that I didn't care anymore*

"I can't stop picturing her sitting on the freaking toilet and bawling her eyes out," Eleven said with a hiccup, "all alone in that big, expensive fucking house".

She took a gulp of the drink (a vodka shot) she was currently holding.

"And he will act as if he doesn't even notice," she continued.

Tears were running down her face.

Her and Max's college friends shared nervous glances amongst themselves: their usually carefree friend was acting a lot unlike herself. Nobody but Max had the slightest clue about who or what Eleven was even talking about.

"El? Ellie, come on. Let's go to the bathroom for a moment," the redhead said as she all but pulled her heartbroken friend towards the big, empty bathroom of the luxurious flat they were currently in.

"She's really, really drunk, guys. I'm so sorry, we had some drinks before coming here," she continued apologetically, trying to make up an excuse to ease a bit the uncomfortable atmosphere amongst their friends, who were gathered on the living room.

Truth was, the only thing El had had to drink before the vodka shot was a single bottle of beer... and she'd had it half an hour ago, when Max and her had first arrived to their friend's flat. On the other hand, if Max had learned something from the countless parties and underage drinking the both of them had done over their high school years, it was that Eleven could *really* hold her liquor.

The redhead knew for a fact that, right now, her best friend was not

drunk at all. However, she had never seen El acting like this before – either drunk or sober.

As soon as Max managed to successfully push her brunette friend into a sitting position on top of the closed toilet and close the door, Eleven began sobbing.

"It's going to be okay," Max muttered comfortingly as she folded some toilet paper and handed it to her friend, "it will be alright tomorrow."

"NO IT WON'T! NOTHING WILL BE OKAY TOMORROW," El screamed in irritation as she waved her friend's hands away.

"You know what will happen tomorrow, Max?" she let out a hysterical giggle, "tomorrow I will have an excuse not to think about any of it and you know what? *I won't*. I won't think about it and I'll pretend to have this happy, carefree life because I'm just a fucking coward who couldn't even protect her own moth-"

"–Ellie, you don't have to think about it today either, we can have fun like we always do on shitty days like this and you can forget all about that," Max interrupted, trying to soothe her agitated best friend.

"No, Max. This time... thi-it was different, she was... she's not doing ok," the brunette said with a trembling, sad voice.

Eleven thought about the faraway look on her mother's brown eyes and the haggard look of her face, it spoke of the kind of suffering that not even makeup could quite cover. She remembered the look of distaste and annoyance on her stepfather's face when he looked and talked about her mother.

"You didn't see her," El finally stated.

She thought about that sinking feeling of absolute dread she'd felt throughout that video call with her mother and Brenner.

Everything was terrible.

And she could do absolutely nothing about it.

"Is there anything at all we can do to help her *right now*?" the redhead

asked.

The brunette looked up feeling hopeless.

"N-no," Eleven answered in defeat, knowing it all too well.

"We have tried so many times, *so many times*," Max said.

Eleven knew her friend was right.

"I'm not saying we give up, Ellie, but at least we would have to think of a different approach to the literally *thousands* of ones we have already been unsuccessfully trying for the past ten fucking years."

El sniffled and, with trembling hands, tried to wipe her wet face and eyes with the toilet paper her friend had handed her and then left on the corner of the sink.

"Today, when we are feeling desperate and depressed and angry, is not the best time to come up with something," the redhead continued matter-of-factly.

Ever since sophomore year, when Max had officially assumed responsibility over her fearless and passionate friend, she had become the voice of reason. It had almost been as if rebellious Max had matured from one day to the next.

"So what do we do now?"

"We try to have fun," Max answered simply as she helped her friend clean up her ruined makeup.

-...-...-...-

*There's no one else around you
Not that I was waiting, vision ever fading
Heading for the deep end
Soon as I remember, baby, I surrender*

"WHAT THE FUCK YOU GUYS, I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR HOURS!"
Lucas bellowed from the front door, tapping his foot impatiently.

Despite each of them being in their own bedrooms, the guys could clearly hear their friend's annoyed voice.

"Mike?" Will asked, unexpectedly poking his head around the door to his tall friend's bedroom, "Let's go?"

"Yeah," Mike answered with a sigh as he carelessly shoved his black wallet in his jean's pocket.

As he made his way out to the front door, he mindlessly caught a glimpse of his reflection on the medium-sized mirror in the hallway. He looked tired but clean – he'd made sure to wear the shirt and jean pants he'd gotten from the laundry a couple of days ago. Nevertheless, it would be pretty obvious to anyone that, other than that, he hadn't put much thought or effort in his outfit or appearance.

Dustin was already in the hallway, standing next to Will. The stocky boy was currently preoccupied in fixing his messy light brown curls underneath his favorite blue, red and white hat.

"They won't believe you're over twenty one Dustin," Lucas said as he glanced at his friend's feeble attempts of fixing his unruly hair.

"Again," added Mike with a laugh.

Dustin shot both of his friends a dirty look.

"It's not my fault you nerds don't know how fashion works," the stocky boy replied with a dramatic huff.

The four of them finally headed out, facing the windy night with expressions varying from excitement (Dustin, though he tried to hide it), to confidence (Lucas), to mild amusement (Will) to resignation (Mike).

"Are you ok dude?" Dustin asked after noticing the deep frown on his friend's pale and freckled face.

"I bet it won't be nearly as bad as the last time," Will piped in with a reassuring smile.

"Yeah, brighten up Mike, at least we'll get wasted," Lucas said as he

patted his tall friend in the back.

It really wasn't as if Mike was a party pooper all the time. It was just that this time, he didn't have it in himself to be cheery and want to celebrate. There was not much to be happy about, after all. A couple of days ago, his older sister, Nancy, had texted him saying that their parents had finally decided to get a divorce. Ever since, he couldn't stop thinking about how poor Holly must be holding up, all alone back at home and seemingly always caught in the middle of Ted and Karen's fights.

His friends still knew nothing about the divorce thing. Truth was, Mike couldn't even think about how to bring that sort of stuff up in a casual conversation ("Hey guys, do you want to have another Star Wars marathon soon? Oh, by the way, my parents are getting a divorce and I'm worried sick about my little sister"). In fact, the only thing that had been keeping him from going crazy due to overthinking the whole shitty divorce thing had been daydreaming about the mysterious girl he had met on the beach area all those days ago.

Blocking preoccupying thoughts with flashes of her pretty face, radiant smile or sparkling eyes was becoming almost a routine for him. She actually made him happy without even being there, which was something embarrassing to admit. Nevertheless, Mike was aware that this girl – who probably hadn't even given a single thought to him after their chance meeting at the beach – had pretty much become his life saver.

How was it possible that someone could leave such an important mark on someone else's life after such a short time?

-...-...-...-

*Fate can decide, I can ignore
I'll just pretend that I always knew
That I had the chance to*

"Never have I ever been stranded on the side of the road."

After Max and El came out of the bathroom about an hour ago, the

group of friends had been playing the drinking game.

Two of the six people in the group drank from their blue plastic cups.

Everyone looked expectantly at Max and Eleven, who were the only ones who had been in such a situation.

"My stepbrother was supposed to drive us to a concert-" Max began.

"-The Killers, and Max was insulting his slutty girlfriend for three hours straight. Nonstop," El interrupted with a giggle, remembering just how red Billy's ears had gotten at her friend's taunts.

"Yeah, and you weren't helping either, replaying MMMbop on a loop the whole fucking ride," Max said, rolling her eyes affectionately.

Their four friends watched the exchange with amusement.

"That song is so catchy and the lyrics are not bad!" Eleven replied.

"Oh, please. You had an unhealthy obsession with the Hanson brothers!" the redhead said with a laugh and soon the others joined when they noticed El's guilty blush.

"Anyway, the douchebag got sick of us and ditched us somewhere in the middle of the interstate," Max continued, after they all caught their breaths.

"But did you make it to the concert?" one of their friends, Elena, asked.

"We did," Eleven said, sharing a look with Max and smiling cryptically. That was a story for another time and place.

The group continued playing for a while, listening to everything from embarrassing stories, to cute anecdotes, to a couple of confessions about felonies. However, it was a Saturday night and it didn't take long for some of them to get restless as the effects of the alcohol they were drinking truly kicked in.

"I want to party!" the usually reserved Annie exclaimed all of a sudden, interrupting Elena midsentence.

"I heard someone say there's a place downtown where they give free drinks," a friend of theirs, Nick, said with a knowing smile.

"Why aren't we there already?!" Eleven exclaimed loudly as she got up from her place in the couch.

-...-...-...-

*I just need to breathe out
Decisions are approaching...*

Despite the fact that the movement in the city was pretty much never-ending, Saturday nights definitely seemed like the busiest ones. Especially downtown, where young people crowded every establishment.

Laughing, tipsy people made their way through the streets, carelessly bumping into strangers and apologizing with huge, goofy grins. A pretty redhead girl stood out from her group of friends because she was laughing obnoxiously loud on the other side of the street. The guys noticed Lucas stopping dead on his tracks to openly gaze at her. Dustin had also stopped in the middle of the street, his mouth was hanging slightly open.

Mike elbowed Dustin teasingly and Will waved a hand in front of Lucas' star struck face.

"Quit ogling the poor girl," Will said with a smile.

"Sh-" Lucas began.

"-she's perfect," Dustin interrupted.

Will and Mike smiled at that.

"Come on, you haven't even talked to her," pointed out Will.

"And her laugh is annoying," added Mike.

"Let's just go to the party," Lucas said, trying to act nonchalant as Dustin continued to stare at the girl.

The four guys walked to the end of the street and then turned left. Lucas guided them into a discreet-looking establishment.

The "best rave of the fucking year" turned out to be a normal-looking party at a (thankfully) not so crowded club. Apparently, the place had just opened a few days ago and, since not many people knew about it, were offering free drinks until midnight.

As they looked around the place, Dustin, Mike and Will had to admit it was nothing like they had imagined.

"Told'ya you guys would like it," Lucas said as he headed to the mostly empty bar, "let's get something to drink".

The bartender was pouring a mysterious white liquid into several shot cups.

"What's this?" asked Dustin, eyeing the drink suspiciously.

"Vodka," said Lucas as he grabbed one of the shots and promptly gulped it down.

"Not vodka," the tall boy said once he finished his drink, sounding quite surprised, "I have no idea what this is, but it tastes a lot better than any other shot I've tried."

Mike took a cautious sip of the drink.

While it was true that the drink didn't taste as strongly as vodka (since it was sweeter), the tall boy could still definitely feel the deep burn of the alcohol in it. Will seemed to perceive the same thing, as he coughed a bit after finishing his shot. Meanwhile, Dustin was already on his third one.

-...-...-...-

*I'm edging closer, shivers all over
It's way too real, I'm way too sober
Usually they've got you covered all over
Lack of composure, I'm walking over*

What will I do?

I never had a chance to

Eleven looked at the club skeptically. She was a lot more used to partying in super crowded places with loud music vibrating through the walls and psychedelic lights making you feel a lot more inebriated than you actually were.

This, however, was new.

The dancing floor was big enough but it wasn't bursting with people and there was actually some room to dance comfortably. The lights were dim but there were no flickering colored lights bombarding you from all sides. The music was loud but not stridently so. You could probably be heard without screaming your lungs out. Hell, it could even be possible to have an actual conversation here!

While she leaned against a nearby wall, El saw her friends make a beeline for the bar. They probably wanted to make the most of the free drinks while they were still available (they had about forty minutes before midnight).

Eleven remained where she was, she didn't really want to get wasted tonight. She knew she'd wake up feeling like crap tomorrow anyways and having a hangover on top of that probably wouldn't help things at all. The thumping music was catchy and she could recognize one of the modern songs they constantly played on the radio, she began moving her head and tapping her foot along to the tune.

A bit after the catchy song ended, El met Max's blue eyes from across the room. "Bathroom", the brunette girl mouthed as she pointed to a secluded corner of the locale and her friend smiled understandingly all the way from the bar. A blonde guy started talking to the redhead, taking her attention off her friend.

Unlike the rest of the club, the bathroom was overly crowded. There was a long line of young women waiting to use the toilet. El sighed as she began scrolling through her phone in an attempt to kill some time.

When she finally made it out of the bathroom, Eleven began scanning the place for her friends. Luckily, she was immediately able to see

Max's tangled red hair moving wildly somewhere in the middle of the dance floor. The minute she turned around, however, the wide smile was frozen on her pretty face.

An all-too familiar pale face and black, rebellious hair stood out to her despite the semi-darkness of the club. The angular profile and worried expression called to her from the other side of the room.

Bicycle Guy.

Her mouth suddenly felt dry, too dry.

El felt the familiar tingle begin in her feet and palms.

She could feel her inner voice telling her to *run*. But it was different this time.

Run *to* him.

Run *from* him.

She stood frozen.

Two parts of her were warring. How could a total stranger elicit such a strong inner turmoil within her? How could someone make a chance appearance in her life and completely unbalance it?

What made this pale, lanky guy so different?

Maybe tonight it's time to find out, she thought.

Her feet ultimately took the decision for her.

Fuck it all.

-...-...-...-

*There's no one else around you
I've done all this waiting, vision ever fading
Making such a promise
Only leads to heartache, closer to an earthquake
Talk about it highly*

Try to stay in motion

He was alone at the bar.

Well, alone meaning that his three friends had left the drinking area not so long ago, leaving him and his awkwardness behind. The bar however, was buzzing with people and the bartender seemed to be busier than ever, refilling over and over again the tiny shot glasses on the wide wooden countertop.

There were still four minutes left until midnight.

Lucas was somewhere on the middle of the dance floor, probably showing off his amazing dance moves and grinning widely. Dustin was also on the dance floor, dancing with a girl he met at the bar who didn't stop throwing her head back and laughing at everything he said. On the other hand, Will had disappeared half an hour ago, which could be something to worry about if it wasn't a usual thing Will did.

"It's pisco, from South America," he vaguely heard the bartender's hoarse voice say somewhere to his right.

"Doesn't seem too strong," a female voice answered.

"I wouldn't bet on that, pretty one," the bartender answered with a loud laugh.

For reasons Mike couldn't explain and before even fully processing anything, he felt his head snap to his right.

And there *she* was, leaning casually against the wooden counter and delicately holding one of the shot glasses, looking prettier than he remembered (if that could be even possible) in a sleeveless, loose sequined silver dress.

Mike couldn't believe it.

There she was, the mysterious girl he couldn't seem to stop thinking about, smiling her cute dimpled smile and looking almost ethereal to him. Unlike himself, she didn't seem surprised to see him at all. In fact, she was looking right at him as if she had been expecting him to

turn around all along.

"Hey Bicycle Guy," she said lifting an amused eyebrow (probably finding his stupid awestruck face funny).

"Hi-hey!" he stuttered, forcing his brain to come up with words to say to her, "I didn't expect to see you here- Not that I'm not happy to see you."

She delicately tilted her head backwards and drank a sip of her shot.

I'm such an idiot, Mike thought as he mentally slapped himself for being so awkward when life was giving him another chance.

However, she merely smiled at his nervousness.

"You'll have to pay for that, pretty one," the bartender said just as she was finishing the drink, "it's 12:01."

"Party pooper," she said rolling her eyes.

She grabbed her tiny black purse and tried to find some money.

"I'll pay for it," Mike suddenly said, placing some bucks on the counter before she could even get her wallet open.

"Thanks," she smiled and looked at him intensely (so much so that he felt forced to look away), "it seems that I now owe you a dance."

"Oh, no, it's ok really, you don't have t-," he rambled.

She rolled her eyes, grabbed his left arm and headed for the dance floor, unceremoniously dragging the tall boy behind her.

Once they were surrounded by dancing couples, she finally stopped her advance through the dance floor and turned to him.

"Dance with me?"

Her big, brown eyes were doing that thing again. That captivating thing in which they brightened up and, at the same time, darkened as they seem to peer deep into his soul, to see him better than anyone

else. The air seemed to be caught in his throat as he continued to look at the beautiful girl standing before him.

What had she asked?

Mike swallowed, feeling helpless as his brain had gone completely blank in the span of a few seconds. The dim light of the club was reflecting off her sparkly dress, making her positively glow.

Stop getting distracted and say something!

"Sure."

-...-...-...-

*It made my heart run in circles and overflow
And I was closer than ever to letting go
It made my heart run in circles in overdrive
And I was closer than ever to feeling alive*

The music was louder than ever, or maybe she was just imagining things.

She moved her hips and shoulders to the rhythm of Camila Cabello's catchy new song, all the while laughing at Bicycle Guy's lame-ass attempts at doing a coordinated dance move. A few minutes into their dancing had been enough for El to become convinced that the tall guy was just hopeless at it. He tried spinning around, but his move had been so sudden that he almost lost his footing and ended comically flailing his long arms around.

It had come to the point that the lanky guy seemed no longer mortified about his clumsiness and instead exaggerated it just for fun (and to make her laugh, but she didn't know it).

As she gazed at his attractive angular face, El couldn't help thinking about how politely and respectfully he had behaved all night long. She thought about the way he constantly offered his hand for her to twirl around, about how he hadn't leered down at her like so many men often did in these sort of situations. Eleven thought about Bicycle Guy's genuine joyful smile throughout the night and how being with him made her grin so much her cheeks were starting to

really hurt.

She couldn't deny that this was the most comfortable she'd ever felt with someone that wasn't Max.

As the catchy pop tune neared its final chorus, the smiling boy took her hand for her to twirl around. Just as she did so, she bumped into someone – or someone bumped into her? – really, really hard. She would have most likely lost her footing if it weren't for a pair of steady arms catching her.

El suddenly found herself pressed against Bicycle Guy's chest. His long and surprisingly strong arms were still holding her, despite the fact that she had already managed to regain her footing. One of his hands was holding her wrist delicately and she suddenly felt his thumb softly running over – *caressing*, really – the tender skin over her tattoo. Somehow, it felt more intimate than anything she had ever done.

She couldn't suppress a shiver that made her quiver from the point where his skin met hers to the very depths of her. Eleven licked her lips slowly, drawing his dark eyes to her mouth. It was easy to read that he was in the same mindset as her. Their labored breaths were now mingling together, wordlessly conveying the intense feelings that had agitated them so. Instinctively, she leaned a bit closer, pressing herself closer to him.

El *wanted* him.

Without a warning, her eyelids fluttered shut as she desperately waited for him to finally make the move.

But nothing happened.

She opened her eyes to face him and met his dark gaze. It seemed to only be conveying a question, an obvious one.

Eleven smiled and rolled her eyes, it was evident that Bicycle Guy was one of the good, respectful ones that wouldn't kiss her without being one hundred percent sure that it was what she wanted too.

He was nice.

Nice, unlike any of the fuckboys she had hung out with in the past who never cared to ask for permission or gave any importance to what she wanted.

Nice, in a way that made her doubt that he would ever try to hurt her.

No! Cut the crap, she chastised herself.

Having those sort of thoughts was dangerous, very dangerous. Because if there was something she had learned for sure, it was that everyone always wanted something out of you. Everyone would, sooner or later, hurt you – which is why her approach to relationships had always been "use them before they use you".

She was completely convinced that this was almost like a scientific or physical law (like gravity or something).

Still, as the minutes seemed to blend together while they embraced in the middle of the slightly crowded dance floor, Eleven couldn't bring herself to care about the worrying thoughts buzzing in her mind. There was something much more powerful and urgent demanding her attention and overtaking her thoughts.

Eleven bit her lip. Hard.

At that moment, the almost nonexistent gap between her and Bicycle Guy's faces (that small amount of space that seemed to mock her) seemed smaller and bigger than ever.

Fuck it all.

She leaned forward and closed it.

~...~...~...~

Let's not think about it

Put your arms around me, I can sense you doubt me

You don't need to promise

That only leads to heartache, closer to an earthquake

Talk about it highly

All that's left to do, all that's left to do

Her arms were thrown around his neck as his hands rested on her small waist. They were kissing passionately on the middle of the dance floor. A hunger Mike had never felt before controlled him now. Her delicate fingers moved up to pull at his wavy hair and she let out a small, almost imperceptible moan.

Every thought Mike had escaped his mind as he pulled her closer to him, his long fingers roaming her lower back desperately.

She pulled back for air and stared at him with undecipherable, hooded eyes.

Oh God, she's so perfect, Mike thought dizzily as he swayed slightly on the spot.

A small laugh escaped her at his dazed look.

She lifted a hand to fix her messy brown hair and he noticed something dark on the soft inner part of her wrist. Gently, Mike grabbed her hand to examine it and saw the number "011" tattooed on blunt, black ink.

The tall boy looked at her questioningly.

"It's my nickname. Eleven," she explained as she quickly drew her hand away.

After those few blissful minutes, reality was starting to hit her now.

Don't let him in. Don't let him in. Don't let him in. Don't let him in. Don't let him in.

"Oh, I'm Michael, Mike for short," he said, oblivious to her sudden discomfort, waiting for her to introduce herself as well.

She wasn't about to tell him that. Tonight was a night for forgetting, after all.

"I'm just El," she answered with (what she hoped was) a mysterious smile.

Use them before they use you.

"Do you want to get out of here Mike?" she asked, lifting an eyebrow.

He liked how her name sounded on her lips.

"Yeah, sure, let's get out of here," Mike said, not thinking about it twice.

They headed out of the bar, the cold night air making goosebumps appear on the skin of their arms. The tall boy glanced at the pretty girl walking beside him, thinking that she was probably chilling to death in that loose, sleeveless dress. He regretted so much not bringing a jacket with him tonight.

There goes your chance to be courteous, he thought.

"So, um, what do you want to do El?" he asked after a while.

She leaned closer to him, her smell hitting him immediately, and stood on the balls of her feet to make herself a couple of inches taller. Mike's breath was catching.

"Mike," she whispered into his ear seductively.

The tall boy visibly swallowed.

"I haven't had lunch or dinner, I'm starved," Eleven continued and then eased herself down.

Once again, she laughed at his reaction to her and he could only blush in response. Was he that obvious? Was it bad?

"Do you feel like getting a burger?" Mike asked, ignoring her smirk and trying to play cool, "I know the best place."

Benny's Dinner was about to be closed for the night but, luckily, the owner knew Mike pretty well.

"Hey Benny!"

"Night Mike," the gruff man answered with a sincere smile, "what can I get you?"

"Two burgers to g-"

"-and fries," Eleven piped in.

Soon enough, they sitting on a deserted park, munching on their meal.

Mike was doing all the talking. He had always had a habit of talking nonstop, only slightly less than Dustin.

Now, however, he wasn't just rambling about whatever came to mind. There was something about El that made him feel listened. She was easy to talk to, she seemed to understand – or make a pretty good job of trying to.

He told her about his family problems, about his absent older sister and about how worried he was about his little sister Holly. She cut in occasionally, to make some remarks and give advice. From those rare interventions, Mike gathered that she probably had had a rough family life as well. A silence fell over them after he finished talking about a particularly grim memory of his parents fighting each other during his senior year of high school.

The last thing he wanted was to make her feel uncomfortable and he immediately launched himself into a funny middle-school anecdote.

"Did you know me and my friends won the science fair every year in middle school?" he asked rhetorically, focusing on El's interested gaze, "at least we were supposed to..."

Soon, both of them were giggling so much their jaws hurt.

"This is the first time I ever told that to an-," Mike laughed incredulously.

He cut himself short, however, when he noticed she wasn't laughing anymore. Instead, Eleven was looking at him with those piercing brown eyes of hers, her enigmatic gaze making him forget his next words.

"Mike, take me home," she said.

A/N: Next chapter will probably be M rated, so be warned if you're not into that sort of stuff. As always, I'm happy to read what you think about the story!